



BUSINESS OVERVIEW AND BRIEF VITA

OVERVIEW

Systems In Sync provides strategic planning and consulting services for educational, nonprofit, and governmental organizations applying a systems thinking approach. We conduct our work based on the following guiding principles:

- Establishing clear values and a vision will steer organizations in the right direction.
- Organizations have it within themselves to solve their own problems.
- The work of organizations is based on relationships and behavior and being effective at these will result in an effective organization.
- Attention to process results in greater task efficiency.
- Ownership of the problem results in ownership of the solution.
- Effective communication, both internally and externally, is essential to organizational success.
- Involving key stakeholders in the process, including detractors, results in more effective solutions.
- Organizations need to evolve into learning organizations that engage in continuous improvement.

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SERVICES

Systems In Sync offers the follow consulting services:

Strategic Planning: create a vision; clarify mission; surface and examine values, beliefs, and assumptions; gather stakeholder input; prioritize goals; develop action plans; assist in implementation and evaluation

Organization Development: analyze current state; determine desired outcomes and readiness for change; foster a climate of support for change; examine use of resources; create and implement effective change interventions; evaluate effectiveness of change strategies

Board/Leadership Development: develop a common vision; define and clarify roles and responsibilities; establish clear goals and expectations; improve meeting efficiency; develop strategic direction; improve communications to and relationships with constituencies

Team Building: establish clear working agreements; develop organizational trust; determine representative team membership; foster team commitment and collaboration; enhance communications through understanding individual differences; examine team processes; create high functioning teams

Program Design, Implementation, and Evaluation: determine needs; establish measurable outcomes and indicators of progress; design and implement program; evaluate success; redesign program as needed

Meeting/Public Forum Facilitation/Community and Civic Engagement: establish clear meeting objectives; identify stakeholders; develop a meeting structure that enhances dialogue; define clear meeting ground rules and expectations; encourage balanced participation; create a clear follow-up plan; communicate outcomes broadly

Policy Governance Implementation: acquire a basic understanding of the Policy Governance model; develop Ends and Means policies; define the ownership; establish a monitoring schedule; create a process for on-going evaluation and improvement

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Association of Nature Center Administrators (ANCA) – Business Member

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BoardSource

Common Good VT Steering Committee and Conference Committee

Council on Fund Raising (CONFR)
Board member and Treasurer
Finance and Governance Committees

Hanover Area Chamber of Commerce
Membership Committee
Chamber Ambassador

Local First Alliance, Supporting Member

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation

NH Center For Nonprofits

Organization Development Network

Society for Organizational Learning

Women's Business Owners Network (WBON)

BIOGRAPHY

Marty Jacobs, president of Systems In Sync, has been teaching and consulting for twenty years, applying a systems thinking approach to organizations. She currently provides strategic planning and policy governance expertise for the Vermont School Boards Association and has worked with several school districts to engage them in community conversations. In the nonprofit sector, Marty provides strategic planning, board leadership training, Policy Governance implementation, community engagement facilitation, and staff development. Additionally, Marty has served on a variety of nonprofit, professional, and school boards over the past twenty years. Marty has also written for *The Systems Thinker*, *Vermont Business Magazine*, *American School Board Journal*, *Leverage Points Blog*, and *Confident Voices for Nurses* on topics related to organizational learning, systems thinking, workplace culture, board governance, and

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community engagement. A graduate of Dartmouth College, Marty received her M.S. in Organization and Management from Antioch University New England in Keene, NH.

PUBLICATIONS

"Learning Organizations: Fad or Future?" *Vermont Business Magazine*, September 2007.

"Personal Mastery: The First Discipline of Learning Organizations," *Vermont Business Magazine*, October 2007.

"Mental Models: The Second Discipline of Learning Organizations," *Vermont Business Magazine*, April 2008.

"Building Shared Vision: The Third Discipline of Learning Organizations," Systems In Sync website, November 2007.

"Team Learning: The Fourth Discipline of Learning Organizations," Systems In Sync website, February 2008.

"Systems Thinking: The Fifth Discipline of Learning Organizations," Systems In Sync website, March 2008.

"Creating Learning Organizations: Integrating the Five Disciplines," Systems In Sync website, July 2008.

"Creating Community Discourse: Moving From Debate to Dialogue," *The Granite State Planner*, Spring 2009.

"The Juggling Act," *American School Board Journal*, July 2009.

"Community and Civic Engagement Techniques," Systems In Sync website, July 2009.

"Healthcare Rx: Are You a Learning Organization?" *Confident Voices for Nurses*, November 2009.

"Healthcare Rx Part II – Creating Environments That Nurture Collaboration: Essential Responsibilities of Leadership and Staff," *Confident Voices for Nurses*, January 2010.

"Healthcare Rx Part III – Strategic Visioning: Applying the Zoom Lens," *Confident Voices for Nurses*, April 2010.

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“Healthcare Rx Part IV – Challenging Assumptions: How to Break the Cycle of Destructive Interactions,” *Confident Voices for Nurses*, July 2010.

“Patterns from the Sky: How Hot Air Balloons Teach Systems Thinking,” *Leverage Points Blog*, August 10, 2010.

“Healthcare Rx Part V – Encouraging Dialogue: How to Engage Others in Meaningful Conversations,” *Confident Voices for Nurses*, October 2010.

“Systemic Board Governance: Creating Virtuous Cycles of Impact,” *The Systems Thinker*, February 2011.

“Using an Appreciative Inquiry Framework for Building Inter-Shift Teamwork on a Nursing Unit,” with Beth Boynton, RN, MS, *Confident Voices for Nurses*, March 2011.

“Systems Thinking for Healthcare Leaders: Insights for Transforming Workplace Cultures,” *Confident Voices for Nurses*, August 2011.

FACILITATIONS, PRESENTATIONS, AND WORKSHOPS

Governance and Capacity Building

Facilitated Policy Governance model implementation for the Alternative Life Center (Conway, NH, May 2007 to 2009).

Facilitated board and staff work focusing on clarifying roles and responsibilities and board committee structure for the Community Health Center of Burlington (Burlington, VT, April 2008 to July 2008).

Facilitation aimed at clarifying roles and responsibilities, creating stronger teams and more productive meetings, and developing more meaningful participation and leadership of council members for the NH State Council on Developmental Disabilities (Concord, NH, July 2006 to May 2008).

Facilitation with the Council for Children and Adolescents with Chronic Health Conditions to clarify roles and responsibilities and develop a strategic plan (Concord, NH, August 2007 to May 2008).

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Co-facilitated policy governance model implementation with Robin Scheu for Washington South Supervisory Union (Northfield, VT, January 2006 to April 2007).

Strategic Planning and Visioning

Leading a strategic planning process with the Winooski School District that includes engaging the community in a discussion of educational values and beliefs, reassessing the district's mission and vision to reflect those values and beliefs, and developing a five-year plan that incorporates the work of a school improvement grant (Winooski, VT, May 2011 to present).

Planned and facilitated a strategic planning process with the Family Center of Washington County involving a comprehensive internal and external assessment, stakeholder engagement, and development of a final plan (Montpelier, VT, October 2010 to June 2011).

Planned and facilitated a visioning process for the Mascoma Valley Health Initiative that articulated the values of the 13 New Hampshire towns with regards to healthcare and created a sense of commitment to their Upper Valley Healthy Community Project as they carry it through to implementation (Canaan, NH, July 2010 to September 2010).

Planned and facilitated a retreat for The Fort at No. 4 to assist the board of trustees and the community in creating a plan to reopen The Fort and develop a sustainable business model (Charlestown, NH, August 2009 to November 2009).

Facilitated planning meetings for Georgia Elementary and Middle School to assist them in preparing for a community wide forum focusing on school improvement and strategic planning (Georgia, VT, December 2008 to March 2009).

Facilitated planning meetings for the Caledonia Central Supervisory Union to assist them in preparing for a community wide forum focusing on school improvement and strategic planning (Danville, VT, September to October 2008).

Facilitated a strategic planning retreat for the Orleans-Northern Essex AHS District, applying systems thinking to analyze root causes to local issues and to determine key leverage points to include in a strategic plan (Newport, VT, February 12, 2008).

Facilitated a strategic plan update with the Windsor School District, which included conducting a school board retreat, developing guidelines for the strategic planning

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steering committee, creating and distributing a community survey, conducting community focus groups, and drafting a strategic plan revision (Windsor, VT, October 2005 to June 2006).

Facilitated a planning meeting for the River Bend Career and Technical Center Advisory Board (Newbury, VT, August 17, 2005).

Facilitated a planning meeting for the Task Force for Early Behavioral Education for Children With Autism for ARCH of the Upper Valley (Lebanon, NH, May 20, 2005).

Facilitated a strategic planning process for the Ludlow Elementary and Black River High School Districts which included the development of a mission statement and strategic plan (Ludlow, VT, February – July, 2004).

Facilitated a strategic planning process for the Windsor School District that included the development of a mission statement and strategic plan (Windsor, VT, May – September, 2003).

Co-facilitated strategic planning forums with Winton Goodrich, Associate Director of the Vermont School Board Association for the Fairfax, VT, Windsor, VT, and Ludlow, VT school districts (Fairfax, VT, February 13, 2003, Windsor, VT, March 27, 2003, and Ludlow, VT, January 28, 2004).

Facilitated the annual board strategic planning retreat for WISE, the domestic violence and sexual assault agency for the Upper Valley of NH and VT (Lyme, NH, November 24, 2002).

Community Engagement and Facilitation

Facilitated a community roundtable focused on addressing the future of the Chelsea Public School in light of declining enrollment (Chelsea, VT, March 17, 2010).

Facilitated community forums aimed at addressing concerns over facilities use and developing solutions suitable for all stakeholders for SAU #70 (Hanover, NH, April 2008 to August 2008).

Facilitated a community conversation for the Northfield School District to bring community members together to develop solutions to a long-standing unresolved issue

with the expansion of the athletic fields (Northfield, VT, August 2007 to September 2007).

Facilitated a focus group of area executive directors for the Upper Valley United Way exploring the issue of how possible funding changes would affect area agencies (Lebanon, NH, October 5, 2004).

Organization Development

Conducting a workplace assessment and implementing coaching and training for the Vermont Agency of Transportation with three other colleagues (Greg Hessel of ReGeneration Resources, Bill Hancy of Epiphancy, and Ronda Berntsen of Berntsen Consulting) that will identify and address issues related to harassment and discrimination (Montpelier, VT, April 2009 to present).

Teaching

Designing and delivering a session entitled “Turning Dreams Into Reality: The Power of Strategic Planning and Systems Thinking” for the Management and Leadership Development Program at Dartmouth’s Nelson A. Rockefeller Center (Hanover, NH, August 2009 to present).

Program Implementation and Evaluation

Facilitated the implementation of school-wide behavior support program, developing implementation teams, and evaluating implementation effectiveness (Claremont, NH, Newport, NH, Lisbon, NH, and Canaan, NH, September 2004 to January 2008).

Conducted an evaluation of the non-academic student support services for the Montpelier Public Schools involving staff interviews and parent and student focus groups in conjunction with George Appenzeller of System Wide Solutions (Montpelier, VT, December 2005 to May 2006).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Program Evaluator for eight NH schools (Bennington, Canaan, Claremont, Keene, Newport, Peterborough, and Unity, NH, December 2004 to April 2008).

Presentations and Workshops

“Partnering for Posterity: The Board Chair – CEO Relationship” session delivered for the Librarians of the Upper Valley (Lyme, NH, September 19, 2011).

“Walking the Talk: Best Practices in Community Engagement” session delivered for the Northern New England Chapter of the American Planning Association (Burlington, VT, September 8, 2011).

“High Performing Volunteer Teams: It’s Closer Than You Think!” workshop delivered for the Governor’s Conference on Volunteerism (Concord, NH, May 17, 2011).

“The Dreaded ‘M’ Word: How to Plan and Lead Productive Meetings,” half-day workshop delivered for AmeriCorps opening day training (Concord, NH, October 27, 2010).

“Developing 20/20 Vision: Insight in to Building Board Capacity,” one-day workshop for the Association of Nature Center Administrators Annual Summit (Tomahawk, WI, August 19, 2010).

“Communicating Across the Generations to Build Relationships: How to Combine Technology With Soft Skills,” webinar co-facilitated with Mark Scott of eTapestry for Common Good Vermont (June 30, 2010).

“Implementing Strategic Change,” presentation for Common Good Vermont, Upper Valley Region (White River Junction, VT, June 4, 2010).

“Governing With Clarity,” half-day workshop delivered for the Mount Washington Observatory trustees (Crawford Notch, NH, April 17, 2010).

“LinkedIn: A Guided Tour,” presentation for the Women’s Business Owners Network, Upper Valley Chapter (Norwich, VT, March 18, 2010).

“Creating a Sustainable Future Through Public Dialogue,” presentation for the Northshire Nonprofit Network (Manchester, VT, March 5, 2010).

“Group Facilitation: How to Engage Without Enraging,” half-day workshop delivered for AmeriCorps opening day training (Concord, NH, October 28, 2009).

"Creating Community Dialogue," presentation for the NH Planners Association Annual Conference (West Lebanon, NH, June 4, 2009).

"The Board Development Express: Roles, Policy, Vision, and Strategic Planning in One Quick Trip," workshop for the Seacoast Consumer Alliance (Portsmouth, NH, May 30, 2009).

"Tools For Strategic Planning: A Systems Thinking Approach," workshop for the Annual Governor's Conference on Volunteerism (Concord, NH, May 18, 2005 and May 17, 2006), the Women's Business Owners Network Upper Valley Chapter (July 20, 2006), and Giving Monadnock (Keene, NH, May 21, 2009).

"Creating a Shared Vision," workshop for Giving Monadnock (Keene, NH, April 30, 2009) and the Annual Governor's Conference on Volunteerism (Concord, NH, May 12, 2009).

"Educational Governance: Clarifying Our Roles and Responsibilities," half-day workshop for the Dresden School Board (Hanover, NH, May 7, 2009).

"Excellence in Governance: Understanding Board Roles and Responsibilities," half-day workshop presented for On the Road to Recovery (Manchester, NH, March 26, 2009), Northeast Kingdom Community Action (St. Johnsbury, VT, July 6, 2007 and East Burke, VT, November 20, 2008) and Tri-City Consumer Action Cooperative (Dover, NH, July 30, 2008).

"Principles of Good Governance," presentation for Leadership Upper Valley, Health and Human Service Day (Lebanon, NH, November 13, 2008).

"Making Lists: Use It or Lose It?" half-day workshop delivered for AmeriCorps opening day training (Concord, NH, October 22, 2004 and October 20, 2008).

"Changing the Conversation: Using Dialogue and Skillful Discussion," presentation for the Upper Valley Chapter of the Women's Business Owners Network (Lebanon, NH, July 17, 2008).

"Match Maker, Match Maker: Board Recruitment, Orientation, and Retention," half-day workshop presented for Seacoast Consumer Alliance (Portsmouth, NH, May 24, 2008).

“The Buck Stops Where? – Fiduciary Responsibilities for Boards,” half-day workshop presented for Seacoast Consumer Alliance (Portsmouth, NH, May 3, 2008) and Circle of L.I.F.E. (Derry, NH, June 24, 2008).

“Aligning Organizational Goals and Vision With Individual Goals and Vision,” two-day workshop presented for the staff of On The Road To Recovery, Inc. (Manchester, NH, June 28 & 29, 2007).

“Community Engagement: Having Conversations That Matter,” two-session workshop presented for the Annual Governor’s Conference on Volunteerism (Concord, NH, May 16, 2007 and May 13, 2008).

“Effective Employment Practices,” one-day workshop presented to the administrators of the NH Peer Support Agencies (Concord, NH, April 30, 2007).

“Looking Forward by Looking Back,” one-day PBIS Universal Team workshop (Greenfield, NH, March 27, 2007).

“Vermont’s K-12 Education and Governance System: A Statewide Conversation,” presentation for the Vermont Superintendents Association/Vermont School Boards Association Annual Fall Conference, co-facilitated with George Appenzeller and Robin Scheu (Montpelier, VT, November 16, 2006).

“Universal Team Training for Cohort 4 Schools Involved in PBIS-NH,” one-day workshop co-facilitated with Howard Muscott (Greenfield, NH, September 19, 2006) and with Joyce Welton (Littleton, NH, September 26, 2006).

“Supporting Universal Teams in Sustaining PBIS,” one-day workshop facilitated for PBIS schools in southwest NH (Springfield, VT, March 29, 2006).

“Board Development Training,” workshops presented to the boards of The Alternative Life Center (Conway, NH, January 11, January 25, May 16, and October 25, 2006), Stepping Stone Peer Support Agency (Tunbridge, VT, May 7, 2006), Granite State Monarchs (Keene, NH, May 25, 2006), Tri-City Consumers’ Action Cooperative (Dover, NH, May 31 and July 12, 2006), Seacoast Consumer Alliance (Portsmouth, NH, June 12, 2006), and Circle Of Life (Derry, NH, September 18, 2006).

“Policy Governance Overview and Grant Implementation: Executive Limitations,” presentation for the Vermont Superintendents Association/Vermont School Boards

Association Annual Fall Conference, co-facilitated with Winton Goodrich, Laura Soares, Val Gardener, and John Everitt (Essex, VT, November 4, 2005).

“Sexual Harassment Awareness and Prevention,” half day workshop presented to the staff of The Alternative Life Center (Berlin, NH, November 1, 2005 and September 13, 2006), Granite State Monarchs (Keene, NH, April 4, 2006 and Claremont, NH, June 22, 2007), Seacoast Consumer Alliance and Tri-City Consumer Action Cooperative (Dover, NH, April 6, 2006 and June 12, 2007), Stepping Stone Peer Support Agency (Claremont, NH, April 28, 2006 and June 22, 2007), Circle of Life (Derry, NH, May 2, 2006 and June 26, 2007), On The Road To Recovery, Inc (Manchester, NH, May 22, 2007), and Concord Peer Support and Cornerbridge (Derry, NH, June 26, 2007).

“Cat Got Your Tongue?: Overcoming the Fear of Presenting,” half-day workshop delivered for AmeriCorps opening day training (Concord, NH, October 27, 2005) and for the Kearsage Women’s Network (New London, NH, August 9, 2006).

“Rolling Out the PBIS Universal Schoolwide Discipline System in NH Schools,” one-day workshop co-facilitated with Dr. Marcel LeBrun (Plymouth, NH, October, 14, 2005).

“Celebrating Success: Positive Behavioral Supports in After School Programs,” two-part workshop presented for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Fall Institute (October 6 & 7, 2005).

“What Do You Mean We’re Doing PBIS? Recognizing and Handling Resistance to Implementation,” workshop session for the NH CEBIS Summer Institute (Plymouth, NH, July 1, 2005).

“School Board Roles and Responsibilities,” workshop for the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union board (Bennington, VT, May 5, 2005)

“Targeted Team Training,” co-facilitated this one-day workshop with Eric Mann, Co-Director of NH CEBIS for schools in southwest NH (Springfield, VT, April 8, 2005).

“Creative Problem Solving,” one-day workshop delivered for the Vermont Alliance of Nonprofit Organizations (Rutland, VT, March 31, 2005).

“Gender Issues in the Workplace,” one-day workshop delivered for the Vermont Alliance of Nonprofit Organizations (Randolph, VT, December 2, 2004).

“Communications and Teaming: Skills For Organizational Improvement,” two-day workshop delivered for Central Vermont Solid Waste Management District (Montpelier, VT, November 22 & 23, 2004).

“School Crisis Training,” facilitated tabletop exercises for this VIT workshop (White River Junction, VT, August 19, 2004).

“Diversity: What It Means For a Motivated, Empowered Workforce,” for the monthly meeting of the Upper Valley Human Resource Association (Lebanon, NH, April 11, 2002).



The Juggling Act

*Short-term solutions vs. long-term goals
can be a tough balance for
school leaders, but talking helps*

Marty Jacobs

Balancing the big-picture vision for your district with the district's immediate demands is a challenge for school leaders. The short-term often wins out, much to the detriment of long-term strategic goals.

We hear that we need to be more proactive and less reactive, but how do we stop the cycle of reactivity? One answer is to make room for dialogue. As a professional facilitator, I had the opportunity to do just that with one of my clients, and the results were impressive.

More than a year ago, the Dresden School District in Copyright 2009 National School Boards Association. All rights reserved. This article may be printed out and photocopied for individual or noncommercial educational use (50 copy limit), but may not be electronically re-created, stored, or distributed; or otherwise modified, reproduced, transmitted, republished, displayed or distributed. By granting this limited license, NSBA does not waive any of the rights or remedies otherwise available at law or in equity. By granting permission to use of our materials, NSBA does not intend to endorse any company or its products and services.

Hanover, N.H., hired me to help resolve an issue with community members over a high school sports field. Hanover High School is nestled in a quiet residential neighborhood. The field had been built the previous year. Although concern during construction was that the lights would be intrusive, it turned out that the noise during field use was the major neighborhood complaint.

The Hanover Planning Board had approved conditions of use when the field was completed, with the requirement that, after a year of use, the district would revisit those conditions. That deadline was about six months overdue by the

time I was hired.

Cafe Conversations

Before my first meeting with the district, I did some digging into the history of the project, speaking with the city's planning and zoning director. Also, the superintendent sent me background information, including a draft proposal for revisions to the existing conditions.

At our first meeting, I held up a copy of the draft and asked if it had been publicly distributed. The answer was no; it had only been circulated among a few people. Good, I thought, that is one hurdle we won't have to jump over.

I then asked if they were willing to put the draft aside for

a while. I explained that if we went into our first public discussion on this topic with a proposed set of conditions, the reaction was likely to be resistance. They agreed.

In the next weeks and months, we designed a process that engaged the district, the neighbors, and the parents who supported the athletic program in a community conversation. The first part of the process involved inviting concerned community members and those who were less concerned to participate in a Cafe Conversation (see sidebar). Four to five participants sat at small tables and discussed the following questions in three separate rounds:

- What's important to you about the use of the field?
- What opportunities or trade-offs are there for the com-

Ways to engage the public

You can use a variety of techniques to engage the public in issues ranging from school budgets to bond votes to strategic planning:

Focus groups

This approach involves a series of small group discussions of eight to 10 people around specific questions. Discussions are led by a professional facilitator, and the groups can be a cross section of the population or more homogeneous, but the ultimate goal is to talk with a representative sample of the population. Participants are personally invited to attend the group.

Cafe Conversations

Cafe Conversations was developed by The World Cafe Community (www.theworldcafe.com), a group dedicated to this conversational process. It can be held for a few (12) or many (1,200 plus) participants and generally begins by stating the purpose and context of the gathering. Participants sit in groups of four to five and talk about questions that build upon each other. These are questions that are essential to participants' lives, their work, and their community. At the end, there is a final period of sharing insights and learning in a whole group conversation. A facilitator captures all the ideas, themes, insights, and learning.

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology (www.openspaceworld.org) is a model of community engagement that promotes cooperation and learning in a relaxed atmosphere. It is based on the following principles:

- Whoever comes are the right people. Those who are attracted to the same conversation are the people who can contribute the most to that conversation.
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could've. Focus on the present and not the past.
- Whenever it starts is the right time. Creativity has its own timeline.
- When it's over, it's over. Creativity must not be tied to artificial timeframes.

The model can be used for groups from five to 1,500 people and can be run for up to three days. The meeting focuses on a statement or question, and the group creates the agenda by choosing topics it is interested in leading a discussion about and a time and place for the conversation. The participants sign up for the conversations that interest them. Each conversation group selects a reporter, who then enters a discussion report into a computer, prints it out, and posts it electronically. The event ends with participants sharing insights.

Study Circles

Study Circles (www.studycircles.org) are a technique for creating public dialogue and community change. The process involves three distinct stages: organizing, dialogue, and action. The organizing stage involves setting goals, planning for action, and holding the kickoff meeting. The dialogue stage requires facilitating many small diverse groups of eight to 12 people. These groups meet in two-hour sessions to determine the nature of the problem, brainstorm approaches to change, and move from dialogue to action. The action stage begins with a forum of all Study Circle participants to share their experience and culminates with task forces or other implementation approaches.

Future Search Conference

A Future Search Conference (www.futuresearch.net) typically involves 60 to 70 people and takes place over three consecutive days. Participants review the past, explore the present, create ideal future scenarios, identify common ground, and make action plans. It generally takes three to six months of planning to implement a Future Search conference, and follow-up strategies need to be included in that planning.

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munity with the use of the field?

■ What assumptions do we need to test in thinking about how the field is or should be used?

Key ideas and concerns emerged for each question. Afterward, during a whole-group conversation, we identified common ground and discussed what was missing, what required more clarity, what we had learned, and what needed our immediate attention going forward.

Two weeks later we held another public forum where we reviewed and clarified areas of agreement. We also began to challenge or confirm assumptions by asking the following questions:

■ On what data are these beliefs based?

■ Is there any contrary evidence?

■ Are you willing to consider other possibilities?

After testing assumptions, we began to brainstorm about how the existing conditions might be changed. Each person in the room had an opportunity to add one idea to the list. Participants then voted on their top five choices using colored dots.

At the end of this meeting, participants requested an informational meeting with the district to review the results of an upcoming sound study and statistics pertaining to use of the field and lights during the previous school year. That meeting took place without the need for a professional facilitator.

The final meeting in the process took place two weeks before the Hanover Planning Board was to hear the issue. The superintendent distributed a proposed draft of revisions to the existing conditions prior to the meeting (a much different one than I had seen at the beginning of the process). During the meeting, he presented his rationale for the changes, addressing both the needs of the district and the wishes of the neighbors. I then facilitated the discussion that followed. The transformation in the tenor of the conversation was amazing. As the superintendent framed it later, "I think, throughout the process, we didn't reach 100-percent agreement, but we did reach 100-percent respectful dialogue with each other." Two weeks later, the planning board gave its approval.

Keys to success

So what made this effort so successful? Here are the key factors:

A focus on long-term outcomes: Dresden's leaders recognized the need to commit the time and resources to developing a sustainable solution. During project planning, they were eager to resolve the issue before the start of the athletic programs in August. However, when they realized what was required to reach a satisfactory agreement, they let go of that urgency and instead emphasized the integrity of the process.

Using inquiry rather than advocacy: The most effective

method for creating productive and constructive dialogue is to ask about another's perspective before explaining your own. The district's willingness to drop the initial set of revised conditions and opt for a process of inquiry was key to the entire project's success. The Cafe Conversation model humanized the issue. Neighbors and parents, some who had never met, discussed the issue earnestly and respectfully. It was a true testament to the power of listening and the need for being heard.

Testing assumptions: Assumptions about people's intent often can hinder us from solving problems. In fact, they can be downright destructive. When we engage in dialogue that puts a human face on the issue, it becomes easier to recognize and challenge our assumptions. After the first two meetings with Dresden officials, participants were beginning to shift their thinking. Even the slightest shift opens up new possibilities, and by the final meeting, participants were actually beginning to concede issues to each other.

Looking for common ground: In an issue as emotional as this one, where homeowners were discussing their quality of life, finding the areas of agreement was critical to forward progress. When it seemed like there was a giant chasm between perspectives, the common ground became the foundation to building a sustainable solution. As the thinking began to shift, common ground grew. It was crucial to focus on their agreements rather than on their disagreements.

A commitment to ongoing and broad communication: Most of my clients struggle with this area. Dresden did a great job of continuous communication by e-mail to the concerned parties in this issue. Materials were sent out before meetings to give everyone a chance to read and reflect on them. Moreover, the district has made a commitment to continue to communicate and follow up with the neighbors. As the superintendent reflected at the end of the first meeting, he realized he had been thinking about the district as an institution and not really part of the neighborhood. He wholeheartedly admitted to the participants that he recognized the school was not being a very good neighbor.

Was this an easy process? No. It took a lot of time and effort on the part of the district. Was it worth it? Absolutely. Dresden's ability to focus on the long term and to engage its community in a constructive, open, and respectful process will reap benefits for years. That's a balancing act worth achieving. ■

Marty Jacobs (marty@systemsinsync.com) is president of Systems In Sync, a consulting firm that focuses in the areas of strategic planning, board governance, and community and civic engagement. She also is a former school board member in her hometown of Thetford, Vt.